IX. The Sailor

To Mary Reynolds

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The Sailor

TERENCE or Terrie Riley, back from sea, leaned on the edge of the water-trough in the barnyard. His brother beside him, with a hog-crate for a table, was mending harness. Terrie could have helped him, but as if to suggest that having come home he would not stay, did nothing. A cigarette was always fuming in one of his heavy hands, the other was tucked under his belt. His almond finger nails were outlined with tar. On the back of the fingers at the ring-joint had been tattooed in blue ink, a letter to a finger: HOLD FAST.

His brother's country eyes rested now and then on these two animated words which could not be washed away, but he would not make any inquiry concerning them. Neither did he comment on the less definite altera-

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tions in the sailor's appearance. He wore, for example, a belt instead of suspenders, and wore it about his hips rather than his waist. His body thus elongated, if he stood on one leg, curved out loosely in the opposite direction. If he stood erect he held the initialled hands close to his sides like someone always about to begin a dance. His eyes looked even bluer now that the eyelids were coarsened and ruddy. His mouth had hardened into an expression; once it had been like a sturdy girl's, in spite of the drink. He still had curly hair the color of bee's-wax and pointed teeth which seemed to bite his tongue when he smiled. It seemed sinister to his brother that he laughed less and smiled more.

The elder Riley had fancied that the sea was a hard place and that sailors were rude, bow-legged creatures, perhaps dark as a result of storms and salt, perhaps tongue-tied from perpetual solitude. So he was astonished by this merely flushed and tired homecomer, in whose face instead of age there was

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a look of strange precocity—knots of worn muscle, soft shadows of grimaces left by foreign emotions—indifferent to all that he had left behind several years before, voluble as an aged man.

In spite of his talkativeness, he was somehow inexpressive. He was not thinking in the words he used or, for that matter, in any words. He repeated himself, uttered sentences in which there was nothing remarkable very emphatically, and combined the weakest phrases with the coarsest ejaculations, as if to give his past actions a virility which his ideas did not have, about which he might even have had certain doubts. Meanwhile his eyes lost their precision, and he seemed to be gazing at the very fruits of experience, with the bloom still upon them, his greed unsatisfied.

The sky was burning all about the big Wisconsin sun. Hogs sighed in the mud-hole behind the straw-stack. There were no human beings to be seen in any field.

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"It was just luck to get sent on the other side," Terrie said. "They work 'em hard in the Pacific, they tell me. We got around a lot. Brest and Cardiff and Kiel and Marseilles and all those places. Where I liked it best was Villefranche."

He was never going back there again, it had made him miserable, he loathed it yet liked it best; and he thought of the little boys on the water-front with wet-looking eyes, cigarette butts, dirty habits, some of them blond, supposed to be American, sailors having got ignorant or merely scheming girls into trouble. He wished he had done so, to have left a baby there like him, but he guessed his girl Zizi and her friend Minette would not want to be bothered with one—neither would he, in their place.

A young steer came down the lane to drink from the trough. Its hide kept rippling under a swarm of flies. It sighed with its plump, emasculate muzzle under water. The

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water was dark and there were vivid lumps of slime in it.

"Yeah, I liked Villefranche all right. A good town, but awful dirty."

A little half-moon of stone-and-plaster town in a narrow-necked harbor, all the buildings facing the sea, flesh-pink and yellow like a faded canary-bird and different shades of white with blue shutters; all one cliff of tenements, a street which was a staircase crossing at right angles another which was a filthy tunnel; around little squares the walls painted with false windows and false half-open or closed shutters and ornaments in false relief, like opera settings of canvas seeming to hang diagonally overhead, seeming to sway because of the brightness of the air; with a constant festivity of washing on strings from window to window, worn-out banners and ragged flags of underwear, with glimpses of dishevelled beds, and shapeless females leaning out of the upper stories with their dresses slipping off their shoulders; and

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all the ground floors breathing forth an odor of the saliva of a vast beast. Above the tenements a church which looked like a tombstone and higher up, in walled gardens, the villas, bright and ugly and muffled in spectral vegetation—instead of moist lawns and trees a stiff plumage of palms and other palms shaped like pineapples and cactus with its big blades of paralyzed grass and the nervous, translucent olive-orchards; and still higher up, insignificant mountains of stones and stone-pines, without peaks, without snow, without color, looking dried-up in the diamond light. A landscape wisely spoiled for the sake of the people; down below in the port the young women harmed whenever the men enjoyed it (when Terrie first came there he could not bear to see women crying and gave them anything to stop it) and nothing done to the men, little or nothing required of them—a peaceful, immoral liberty left to do its work for good or ill. The air was always scented; added to the different odors of the

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sea there were roses and lilies, orange blossoms and carnations, in a mixture; one morning one of these would fade out of the potpourri and another take its place; you never knew which was which, you never spoke of it, most of the time you did not smell it at all, tirelessly breathing instead the odor given off along the quay by the row of bars—an acrid compound of sweat, stale liquor, cheaply perfumed girls, sour mops, bad breath—the odor exhaled in furnished rooms by love and sleep.

"It's a small town, but you could raise hell," Terrie Riley told his brother, back in Wisconsin. "They don't have any winter. There's quite a good-sized city near, too."

The wages of a common sailor in francs were the equivalent of a rich young Frenchman's allowance; if his record and his health were good he was entitled to every other night on shore, and the work on board was easy, like sleep a chance to sober up and a regular refreshment of desire; all of which

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wealth of time and money and vitality was spent in the neighboring great city on complicated amusements that they simplified to suit their tastes, or right there in the sight of the battleship, in the Villefranche bars, their back walls jewelled with bottles, a coughing music from the tin morning-glories of old-fashioned phonographs in most of them; only the "Home Hotel" bar (the headquarters of the flock of women who followed the navy from port to port) had an orchestra: a tuberculous girl violinist, a very muscular pianist, a drummer like a rat with a diagonal mouth and no hair.

In Wisconsin an old horse came down to the trough in its turn, the hide of its shoulders worn out, its bones making their way out and up through the flesh. It stood between the two brothers, and for a moment one of its sagging, gelatinous eyes rested on Terrie's face. Certainly he was no farmer any more; animals made him vaguely uncomfortable, though he had learned that it was not when

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human beings were like animals that they were most terrible or dangerous.

He remembered the great orgy at Mother Seraphine's the night before the ship left for home, the last night he spent with his girl Zizi whom he thought he loved and was glad to get rid of. The sailors bought hard-boiled eggs by the dozen to throw at each other; one danced with a full bottle balanced in his mouth, the brandy streaming down his neck and all over his uniform; some, as close together as they could get in a corner, tried to sing, but were choked by who could tell what vague emotion; some danced and fell down, but would not fall alone; through the air, smoky like an olive-tree, you could see a mix-up of the ecstasy of faces, of limp knees, of the admirable gestures of drunken hands, vaguely keeping time with several hoarse banjos; suddenly with a shattering of glass a grinning man made his entrance through a high window, having climbed up on the grape-arbor, and Mother Seraphine's fat hus-

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band, beside himself, ran around in circles, but smiled, able to afford to smile. The women were sad, especially the youngest, and preferred to sit in corners, though the one they called Tata held on to two sailors and her old hair which was like hay came down —it was she who sold dope. Terrie's girl Zizi had some bills in her stocking and counted them impassively; she had made a fool of him, but he could afford to be tender because he was never going to see her again and besides he was too drunk to know the difference between enemy and friend—no one was his enemy, no one was his friend. The sea, like a bird or a jewel in the daytime, had turned black that night; there was nothing left of the battleship but some sparkling balconies up in the dark and a sparkling staircase leading from nowhere to nowhere, or in fact from Villefranche to Wisconsin; and Terrie was going to take away with him the lesson of the former without quite knowing what it was.

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"The only trouble with Villefranche was: there were too many women," he told his brother. "There was one they called the Folle. That means, the Nut."

She had married an American sergeant who was killed in the war and drew a pension from the government, so she was well-to-do; she was still young and healthy; she followed the ships but did not care for the men, followed the women; she wore her hat wrong side before or two skirts, one over and higher than the other, and imagined that she started all the fashions; the girls often got her to dance with Zizi, who whirled her around until she had a fit of hysterics, at which everyone laughed, but it was not cruel because she enjoyed it; and late at night she walked up and down the quay singing operas that she made up as she went along, a symbol of abnormal ways of passing the time, agitating a ghostly shawl.

Pressed down in one corner of the Wisconsin landscape between the sunshine and

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the monotonous fields there was a mass of clouds full of spasmodic thunder—anger about to break, a humiliating story untold. Probably it was going to rain.

Terrie could have gone on all afternoon telling ancedotes about women, but his brother did not seem particularly interested. There was a girl who came down from Paris in the height of fashion, a white turtle-necked sweater with a string of pearl beads over it and a little dog on a leash; she played cards with the men, lost all her money one night, and had no room; she had cheated at poker, so they did nothing but laugh at her, and she paced up and down the quay, sobbing as loudly as she could, "Where'm I going to sleep? Where'm I going to sleep?" Then a big sailor from Kansas swung down the staircase street, and not knowing what was the matter, walked up to her, said, "Aw shut up! You make too much noise," slapped her face, and got into the launch going to the ship; the girl staggered back against the wall,

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too astonished to fight back, then whimpered with a disturbing, soft simplicity, and finally went off somewhere.

As far as one could see in Wisconsin that afternoon, trees were rolling in their deep valley beds, and there was an atmosphere of sorrow which nothing had happened to cause.

Fleshy, serene women, heartsick girls making a violent effort to amuse, others hungry and fantastic, some rosy with fever as well as rouge, adolescent beggars making exciting equivocal appeals for pity, old spent saleswomen, all with the happy look of intoxicated sterility . . . There was one, almost a child, with the protruding mouth and fine glazed eyes of an alley cat, Terrie forgot her name; there was one who wore glasses and looked like a school-teacher; there was Minette, Zizi's friend, a pallid beast who never slept.

Along the Wisconsin road passed two hired girls in gingham aprons. Their cool faces with a mingled expression of fear and inde-

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pendence meant nothing to the returned sailor. In spite of their youth, their long bodies already looked hollow, like those of mothers after childbirth . . .

Whereas the women abroad were short-legged and rounded out, even the thin ones; their glances were both brazen and dependent; around their eyes the eyelids were ashen; the moistly painted mouths were hard in the middle and broken in the corners; they did not walk like men; and even their dishonesty, their anger, were flattery of a sort.

There were two Turks, one vigorous and handsome, the other enormously fat but more popular, especially with the older sailors, who spoke a little English and no French, having taken off the veil to follow the ships, and late at night the vigorous one, tying about her a shawl with fringes, often gave an exhibition of their dances, turning all the middle of her body as if it were a wheel, jerking her neck almost out of joint rhythmically, drumming softly with one index finger against the

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other over her head, Pauline, her friend, grovelling at her feet with the glittering nickel tray on which drinks were served; and a certain sailor in his excitement covered his eyes, whimpered, and cried aloud, "Ooh, take her away . . ."

"I took turns with most of 'em," Terrie boasted without enthusiasm to his brother. "Then after a while I got to playing around steady with a girl from there. That was Zizi. One was enough for me, I figured. And she was healthy and kind'a steady. She didn't cost much. She was a good kid in a lot'a ways."

Once an adolescent girl of a miserable Algerian family who wanted to have sweethearts and better clothes and whose mother beat her, was driven down the street by one of her young brothers, and took refuge in a bar, among the women; an unlovely little animal, she sobbed and beat her forehead with her dark fists; the sailors bought her sandwiches, the women petted her; she

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wanted to return home but was afraid, and it was Zizi who had the courage to go with her to the one-room home in the underground street, hoping to conciliate the Mohammedans; but they gave her a black eye before they began to punish the girl.

When she came back, shedding tears but trying to laugh, she and Terrie went to a quieter place, a green-painted café under an arbor of wistaria, empty but for two Filipinos, cooks on board, playing checkers; over the zinc bar there was a framed poster of a woman with blushing breasts and violets in her hair, a sort of patron saint; and there Zizi sat, wistful at the right moment, smoking, the smoke curling up over her tempting tired mouth, holding his hand; and later, in her poor room, she was like a little fern, moist and colorless, motionless but opening.

"I got real crazy about her," Terrie told his brother. "Crazy, I tell you."

The mimosa was in bloom, clinging branches dipped in a sweet yellow snuff, its

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odor tickling the throat with a mysterious thirst; and in the morning on the quay of slabs of stone, where some of the fishing-nets dried like splashes of sepia applied with a brush while old women mended the others, the girls of the bar were lazy and restless, preening themselves. In the evening the sea slept, and when the moon rose the villas and roads and precipices lay in complete reflections on the surface of the harbor; and in her little room where Zizi lay in a torn pink blanket, by moonlight, by street-lamp light, by the sparkle of the lighthouse, her body was now snowy, now gray as a pearl, and all was perfect. She caressed him from head to foot, mechanically, carefully, like a cat with its kitten. He could not make her laugh, and as the night passed and he grew quite sober a sort of meek and pure delirium took command; yet this woman was no novelty to him, there was no novelty in women... He wanted her in the very moment of possession, wanted her not there but in Wisconsin,

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felt homesick for the farm and the snow. When he went back to the ship early in the morning it was misty and soundless, and there in the harbor with Cap Ferrat's arm around it, floated the battleship like an insane silver-gray palace; he was grateful to it for having brought him there, thought how he had made fun of other sailors who had married or wanted to marry their girls in port, and thought that he had not known what he was talking about.

Terrie would have liked to explain to his brother how and why he had considered marrying this French girl. But it had come to nothing in the end. So he kept it to himself.

He told Zizi that if she behaved well he would marry her at the end of the year and take her to America, whereupon she clenched her fists excitedly as if the promise were a sumptuous gift, but only for a moment; then gazed out to sea with a sort of patient grimace, not deigning to believe good news;

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but after that loved him with a new vitality —systematic, oppressive, interested—which hurt and excited him still more; an extreme jealousy was added to his pleasure, he saying "You're my woman, see," the girl weeping sincerely; so in the tumult of drinks and rendezvous, appetites and punishments, friends in trouble, money lost or stolen, fights and dancing, weeks of their quiet, heedless, bitter idyll passed. Then, of course, the battleship went on to other ports; Zizi stayed there and he sent her money every month; meanwhile his relative continence was just another kind of sensuality, and he exasperated his friends by his sentimental bad temper.

"When we got back there my girl had a girl-friend they called Minette, the bastard. She was all right at first."

He could remember the day he met her, a plump, white, older woman with gleaming eyes and a drooping pink mouth who stood beside Zizi in the square behind the hotel in front of a butcher shop with bead portières

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to keep out the flies, a pile of livers on a table upheld by an iron Cupid painted red. What could have been said with so little of two languages in common? So he put his arm around Zizi and mechanically caressed her, while the other stared at him shamelessly and licked her lips, and he felt a delicious uneasiness because Zizi did not seem jealous.

"She was a bad one, that Minette," he insisted to his brother, who went on working without a sign of being impressed. His eyes swept the scene in Wisconsin with irregular glances. There was a difference between his eyes and his brother's, which had the appearance of astigmatism that serenity and fatigue and long vistas make common among farmers. Terrie's were charged with nervous apathy, the apathy of appetites that have outlived desire, of satiety that is still sensitive. Essentially it was this difference which he needed to explain and could not.

In the afternoon, somewhat drunk, he went up to Zizi's room, found the two girls

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on the couch in each other's arms apparently reading a newspaper, and felt something which resembled a high fever before he had had time to shut the door behind him—the new girl rich and pale, as if bloodless, with shadows of dimples here and there, and dark willowy familiar Zizi; clumsily he forced his way between them, for a moment preferred the blonde, and there was a barbaric luxury in the poor room which he understood then only as one more indulgence to the male among women, the sailor on shore, feeling shame for the first time and liking it. Presently he kept quiet, having had just enough drink neither to sleep soundly nor to stay wide awake; it was hard to focus his attention on certain sounds which he heard, certain movements which he felt, but they made him think himself somehow neglected in his drowsiness, and when he opened his eyes he had to look at the two girls a long time before he saw what he saw: an embrace which had more desperation and gentleness than any he

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had ever taken part in; their eyes were closed, he might as well not have been there; he closed his eyes, pretended to be fast asleep; and it was if there were around the middle of his body a great ribbon of girls' bodies tied with the knot of a kiss, the bow-knot—not his kiss.

"Zizi didn't give a damn for me after that," he told his brother. "She was crazy about her."

Later, looking back, he seemed to have made a fatal discovery that afternoon, but it could not have been then, for he had been happy and pleased with Zizi, thinking that everything was meant for his pleasure; but in a few days the enjoyment turned to cynicism, and cynicism to a sickly sense of frustration, thorough and instructive frustration; for the girls' subsequent behavior revealed that sensuality, its stranglehold of one person upon another, was stronger in proportion as it was inapt to be satisfied; what was the good then of being a strong man, a young sailor . . .

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"She and that Minette played a lot'a dirty tricks on me after that."

His reason to be proud of himself had been taken away, it was a kind of emasculation; the two girls preyed upon this sudden lack of character, this new sophistication which tormented him as if it were his vice, and treated him more and more badly in order to get paid, in dollars, to stop; Zizi would no longer understand what he said or speak the little English that she knew, and Minette's hatred was made perfectly clear, for she lied to the sailors who were his best friends and got him into fights; and they locked him out of Zizi's room which he paid for, only to lead him back in triumph between them the next day, not only drunk but vindictive, hoping his desires would do them harm, not only morose but weak.

"Every time I went with Zizi she stole my money out'a my pants and gave it to the girl-friend to buy snow. She never stole nothin' before."

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"What's that, snow?" the elder brother asked.

"Coke. It's a kind of snuff. They get lit up on it."

Then, when he wanted only to get away, Zizi persecuted him with his former promise to marry her; she cried, without losing hope, and for the first time in his life he took pleasure in another's weeping, in consoling another for the lack of what it was in his power to give; thus, bit by bit, he had become civilized, like a foreigner; but the battleship was going home, his time as a sailor was up, and he thought then that he would be glad to get back to Wisconsin.

Unable to say any more to his brother about Zizi, he said, "It ain't no fighting fleet they send over there. Just for show. Old boats, rotten guns. They'd have to drag 'em up on land if the' was any war. Just advertisement."

And in fact the foreigners were impressed; it proved that America was rich, that all

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Americans had fine bodies, were clean and well-dressed, and under favorable circumstances could stand any amount of regular debauchery. Terrie had been one of a great many ambassadors—ambassadors to Europe's fallen women at least, learning incidentally what "fallen" meant; and it was his brother, the pathetically hardy, sullen, and industrious farmer with a great hulk of a body incapable of most pleasures, whom they had been sent abroad to represent, and having done so they could not be what he was any more; figures in a drunken, superb, idle parade who must fall out of line after a certain number of years, and be out of a job and out of touch with everything . . .

His brother put aside his work on the harnesses and went up into the barn to throw down fodder for the bull and the horses which were not let out to pasture. Terrie followed him, loquacious still because he had not said what he wanted to say.

"They gave us a great send-off the night

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we left. Something to remember, I tell you. And the night before."

Thus his thought returned to his girl; the night before they left, the night of the orgy at Mother Seraphine's, she had stood for a moment outside, on a slab of stone at the water's edge, looking back through the open door where her friend Minette was laughing and stumbling to the music with one arm around a sailor and the other around a young man of the town; and she had a strange expression both of hate and sympathy, an expression which seemed to affirm that she was the one who was neglected and betrayed, but her face had not looked living at all: like that of a stone statue amid the excess, the malice, the happiness, like the sculpture of a dried-up fountain he had seen in a crowded street somewhere over there—dried-up for him at least.

The next day all the women wept, which flattered and cheered up the men; even Minette cried; Terrie's own eyes were moist,

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and many others'. The ship put out to sea at dark; solemnly its three or four search-lights played over the mother-of-pearl tenements, the villas in the hills, the feathery orchards; the shore and the breakwater were covered with silhouettes of people, waving their clothing, more and more silent, more and more sober; he could not distinguish Zizi from the rest and did not try to; never again would he see the launches come in by day or night with one sailor standing still in front, straighter than a figurehead, a flag-pole in human form, nor be that sailor; never again would he lose himself in that night full of bottles, musical instruments, kisses; he had had enough; the ship's band played "Auld Lang Syne," a few men sang.

"Well, it's a great life," his brother admitted with a mingling of two accents: one of envy of the experiences he had missed, one of profound indifference to the results of those experiences, whatever they were. "And I guess once you've been a sailor you aren't

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fit for much of any other life. You wouldn't have the patience."

"Well, I've got to have some fun," Terrie replied, disturbed by his brother's tone. "I got used to it. But I know one thing, I'm not going to join the navy again. I guess I'll go east and get a job."

He gazed out of the high barn-door over Wisconsin: green, sumptuous, tedious, both rich and poor at once, with little sad houses and no night-life. What was odious in it was identical with what was dear. He wanted either the violence which causes sorrow or else—no sorrow. Wisconsin mourned without having any disappointment to mourn for. Very vaguely Terrie was lonesome for temptation and regret, for sharp contrasts, for distinct good and evil—in other words, for Europe—but at the same time he hated these things from the bottom of his heart because they had made a fool of him.

Down below in the barnyard more steers, the cows, and another old horse, one before

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another in a procession, drew near the trough to drink. The young ones brutally pushed the others out of the way. There was a great sunbeam in the water from the setting sun. Probably it was not going to rain.

"Well," his brother went on, "I guess you might as well clear out again when we've had our visit. This ain't no place for you. You can't even get all the drink you want any more—and it's a good thing. You'd get into trouble with girls."

Terrie thought that was not what he meant; he did not want any more sweethearts, or any more drink. Nevertheless, there was a kind of thirst which, like the animals down below, he would have to quench. Wisconsin was no place for one whom its rain, its thousand of luminous creeks, its ponds, its heavy and fertile dew, failed to satisfy. Terrie had no desire to stay there on the farm with a brother who did not know enough about life to understand what he was talking about.

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